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**Secure-base Relationships as Drivers of Professional Identity Development in Dual-career
Couples**

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Abstract

Through a qualitative study of 50 dual-career couples, we examine how partners in such couples shape the development of each other's professional identities and how they experience and interpret the relationship between those identities. We found that the extent to which and how partners shaped each other's professional identities depended on the couple's attachment structure, that is, whether one partner—or both—experienced the other as a secure base. Couples who had a unidirectional secure-base structure experienced conflict between the development of their professional identities. The partner who received a secure base pursued ongoing professional identity development, while the partner who provided a secure base foreclosed it. Couples who had a bidirectional secure-base structure experienced mutual enhancement of their professional identity development. Both partners engaged in it and expanded their professional identity by incorporating attributes of their partner's. Building on these findings, we develop a model of professional identity co-construction in secure-base relationships that breaks new theoretical ground by exploring interpersonal identity relationships and highlighting their roots in the secure-base structure of a dyadic relationship.

Keywords: secure-base relationships, professional identity development, dual-career couples, dual-earner couples

Since the 1970s, when they were first recognized and labeled, dual-career couples have transitioned from being the new deviant (Green and Zenisek, 1983) to being the new normal in the world of work. Dual-career couples are a subset of dual-earner couples in which both partners pursue careers—that is, sequences of jobs that “require a high degree of commitment and that have a continuous developmental character” (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1976: 9). Careers typically involve professional or managerial jobs (Lovejoy and Stone, 2012). They demand dedication and provide an avenue to define and express oneself in and beyond the world of work (Giddens, 1991; Grey, 1994). A growing body of research addresses how couples sustain two careers and how their work and family lives unfold. With the majority of professionals now members of dual-career couples (Catalyst, 1998; Parker and Arthur, 2004; Abele and Volmer, 2011; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014), and organizations struggling to adapt their career trajectories to people who do not have a traditional stay-at-home partner (Hall and Chandler, 2005; Tharenou, 2008; Harvey, Napier, and Moeller, 2009), a better understanding of the experiences of dual-career couples is timely and consequential.

For dual-career couples, work is an important source of self-definition for both partners (Gilbert, 1993; Bird and Schnurman-Crook, 2005). Therefore they must sustain two demanding professional identities (Parker and Arthur, 2004) that require not just room for expression but also, most importantly, space for development. We know little about how dual-career couples deal with the identity demands posed by potentially competing managerial and professional careers. Nor do we know how members of dual-career couples affect each other’s professional identity development—that is, “the change in an identity or self-definition over time” (Dutton, Roberts, and Bednar, 2010: 271). Asking these questions is theoretically important. A large body of scholarship has demonstrated that people develop professional identities in and through

relationships (Van Mannen, 1997; Ibarra, 1999; Gersick, Dutton, and Bartunek, 2000; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006; Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2006), but “few theorists capitalize on identity work process as truly relational” (Lepisto, Crosina, and Pratt, 2015: 17). Researching both partners in a dual-career couple lets us do precisely that.

In this study, we used the dyad as the unit of analysis to examine how two people reciprocally shape or constrain the development of each other’s professional identities, asking how being part of a dual-career couple affects people’s professional identity development. We used inductive, qualitative methods, which are well suited to building new theory in relatively unexplored areas, to study 50 dual-career couples. We interviewed both partners separately about all aspects of their lives— work, non-work, and relational—to develop theory on how the nature of a dual-career couple’s attachment to each other underpins how the partners can shape and, in some cases, constrain the development of each other’s professional identities. The interplay between attachment structure and professional identity construction emerged as we iterated between collecting and analyzing our data and reading extant literatures that helped make sense of those data. For ease of reading, however, we provide an account of the study in the traditional linear fashion, reviewing first both the literatures that helped us frame our study as well as those we used to interpret our findings.

Professional Identity Development in Dual-career Couples

Over the past 50 years, social and economic changes in the Western world have led more and more families to shift from a traditional breadwinner–homemaker arrangement to one in which both partners work outside the home (Barnett and Hyde, 2001; Bond et al., 2003). The majority of research on this shift has examined dual-earner couples, in which both partners have paid jobs

(Hall and Hall, 1979; Hochschild, 1989; Bielby and Bielby, 1992; Pixley and Moen, 2003). We focus here on dual-career couples, a subset of dual-earner couples in which both partners pursue careers that typically unfold in the professional and managerial domains (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1976). While still a minority of dual-earner couples, dual-career couples tend to be more egalitarian (Biernat and Wortman, 1991) and are sources of “insight into future trends in two-earner couples” (Pixley, 2009a: 102).

Struggles such as the work–life strain of managing two jobs and a household are common to dual-earner and dual-career couples (Rothbard, 2001; Moen, 2003; Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2009). Dual-career couples face unique challenges, however, because both partners are invested in careers that demand a substantial investment of time and emotional energy. Research suggests that it is difficult for couples to sustain two careers and that many eventually transition to one career–one job or one career–one homemaker arrangements (Blair-Loy, 2003; Stone, 2007). The difficulty is due in part to the challenge of coordinating the demands of two careers (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1976; Moen and Roehling, 2005) and in part to the challenge of negotiating flexibility with employers so that one or both partners can adjust their careers’ pace (Wharton and Blair-Loy, 2006; Stone, 2007) or take breaks and later opt back in without penalty (Lovejoy and Stone, 2012). Alongside highlighting what makes sustaining dual careers difficult, scholars have investigated the strategies that couples use to manage and prioritize their demanding careers vis-à-vis each other, both over the long-term (Pixley, 2009a) and at times of specific career decisions, such as whether to relocate internationally (Harvey, 1998; Mäkelä, Käsälä, and Suutari, 2011).

Existing research has paid much less attention to how partners influence each other’s professional lives, beyond trading off whose career is prioritized, and to how couples experience

and interpret their lives and work, their selves, and each other. To explore these areas requires investigating the identities of partners in dual-career couples. Identity is a construct that encompasses instrumental, experiential, and expressive considerations. People pursue identities to get something done, to experience and convey themselves in a desired way, and to connect to significant individuals, groups, and organizations (Swann and Bosson, 2010). Identity is a particularly interesting construct for dual-career couples because work is an important source of self-definition for both partners (Gilbert, 1993; Bird and Schnurman-Crook, 2005). Therefore, dual-career couples must manage and develop not only two demanding and often conflicting streams of professional activities but also two demanding professional identities (Parker and Arthur, 2004).

The concept of professional identity, however, is largely absent from studies of dual-career couples. With the exception of one article theorizing that identity underpins how couples decide their career prioritization strategies (Budworth, Enns, and Rowbotham, 2008), the remaining handful of studies that consider identity focus on gender identities rather than the professional identities of partners in dual-career couples (e.g., Rapoport and Rapoport, 1976; Blair-Loy, 2003; Tichenor, 2005). We know little about how members of dual-career couples influence each other's professional identity development and how they experience the relationship between their professional identities. This is a significant theoretical blind spot, given the importance of and interest in understanding identity dynamics in organizations and careers.

Professional Identity and Its Development

The realization that how people define themselves at work affects their performance, status, and well-being has fueled scholars' interest in examining the process and consequences of forging,

revising, and developing self-definitions at work (Ibarra, 1999; Bartel and Dutton, 2001; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006). Professional identities answer the question “who am I as a professional?,” such as a banker, a doctor, an entrepreneur, or a CEO. While most identities change and develop over time, scholars argue that professional identities must develop if one is to be a successful professional or remain one (Ibarra, 2003). This developmental imperative is in part due to professionals’ need to continue tailoring their identity to changing opportunities and demands and to their evolving understanding of their roles (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006) and in part due to people’s desire to move toward a more individuated professional identity that reflects their unique interests and desires (Erikson, 1959; Kegan, 1983; Dutton, Roberts, and Bednar, 2010).

Scholars have long known that our identities develop through interactions with other people (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1956; James, 1957; Gecas, 1982), and existing research confirms that people develop their professional identity in relationships. Researchers in this area have thus far focused on the effects of relationships in the work domain, showing how role models (Ibarra, 1999), peers (Van Maanen, 1997; Gersick, Bartunek, and Dutton, 2000), mentors (Kram, 1988; Higgins and Kram, 2001), managers (Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006), and stakeholders (Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2006) shape a person’s professional identity development. Two overlooked areas, however, persist in relational theories of professional identity development: the role of non-work relationships and the dyadic nature of professional identity development.

The role of non-work relationships. Common across research on professional identity development is an emphasis on relationships in the work domain. Yet people’s work and non-work lives are both relevant to and affected by each other (Edwards and Rothbard, 1999;

Rothbard, 2001; Ramarajan and Reid, 2013). There is compelling evidence that people's relationships at work can shape their non-work identities (Ely and Meyerson, 2010). But the reverse influence—how people's non-work relationships influence their professional identities—remains largely unexamined (Dahl, Dezsö, and Ross, 2012; Desai, Chugh, and Brief, 2014). People have a wide range of non-work relationships, all of which could potentially influence the development of their professional identities. The closest relationship most adults have, however, is with their spouse (or equivalent), whom research consistently shows to have a central role in shaping who one is (Agnew et al., 1998; Drigotas et al., 1999; Aron, 2003). The importance of these relationships and their relative longevity—many romantic relationships span multiple work identity transitions and some even outlast an individual's entire career—make them ideal for investigating the impact of non-work relationships on professional identity development.

The dyadic nature of professional identity development. Although it is accepted that people develop their professional identities through interactions with others, scholars seldom consider the other as a true interaction partner (Lepisto, Crosina, and Pratt, 2015). Instead, extant work has focused on the worker or target individual as the unit of analysis and treated the other as an exogenous factor—triggering, granting, or denying someone's professional identity claims. By doing so, current theories reveal only half of the relational picture. Studying how both individuals in a relationship influence each other's process of developing a professional identity is an indispensable part of investigating the link between identity and relationships. Such processes of co-creation and reciprocal causation between individuals and the relationships in which they are embedded are as rarely studied as they are important (Ibarra, Kilduff, and Tsai, 2005). Studying both partners in dual-career couples thus enables us to investigate professional identity development in a truly relational way and to parse out what aspects of development are

contingent on resources given by the other and what aspects of development are contingent on features of the relationship itself. To use the dyad as a unit of analysis we need to understand the nature of those dyadic relationships. To do so, we turn to the literature on relationships in general and on attachment theory in particular.

Relationships, Attachment Theory, and Partners as Secure Bases

There is a rich body of research that investigates the many ways in which people's relationships influence their performance, growth, and development at work (e.g., Dansereau, Graen, and Haga, 1975; Thomas, 1993; Gersick, Dutton, and Bartunek, 2000). Particularly pertinent to our study is scholarship on positive relationships at work (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003; Dutton and Ragins, 2007; Creary, Caza, and Roberts, 2015; Colbert, Bono, and Purvanova, 2016) and on relational-cultural theory (Surrey et al., 1991; Miller and Stiver, 1997). This research recognizes that the quality of one's attachments can shape growth and is specifically focused on high-quality connections, which allow for the free expression of emotion, can withstand and overcome conflict, and are generative, fostering mutual development (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003). Scholars hypothesize that such positive outcomes result from the mutual contribution of tangible and intangible resources to the other (Miller and Stiver, 1997) and occur in the same domain of the relationship, that is, work relationships lead to positive outcomes at work. We know less about how a more or less generative relationship can influence who someone is and can become beyond the domain of the relationship—i.e., how a non-work relationship might lead to more or less positive outcomes in a work context and vice versa. Furthermore, while existing work gives a rich description of the qualities of such generative relationships, it gives less insight into non-generative relationships—which are usually understood to simply lack the qualities of generative ones. In particular, we know little about how less generative relationships might actively hinder

one relational partner's growth and development. Finally, existing work gives few clues to the psychological underpinnings of generative relationships, to what might prompt people to invest their resources in a relationship. Extending a stream of scholarship that has been mostly theoretical to date, a recent study demonstrated that positive relationships promote personal growth yet concluded that "more research is needed to fully understand the types of relationships that are most likely to promote personal growth" (Colbert, Bono, and Purvanova, 2016: 1215).

To understand the range of relationship types and their psychological underpinnings in more depth, we turned to one of the most well-established psychological theories of relationships, attachment theory. Attachment theory describes how long-term interpersonal relationships shape people's development (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1982). It argues that who we are and who we become is profoundly influenced by who we are attached to and how we are attached to them (Bowlby, 1988; Rice, 1990; Shaver and Mikulincer, 1997; Feeney and Van Vleet, 2010). Developed to understand the bond between infants and caregivers, attachment was originally classified as either secure or insecure (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Children form a secure attachment when their caregiver is dependable and an insecure attachment when their caregiver is unpredictable or rejecting. In the latter cases children adopt one of two possible patterns, avoidant—where they minimize contact with their caregiver—or anxious—where they submissively cling to their caregiver.

From its beginnings in the field of child development, attachment theory has grown into a prominent theory of close relationships (for an extensive review see Shaver et al. 2016), and in recent years it has become one of the main frameworks for the study of romantic relationships (Fraley and Shaver, 2000). Mirroring the relationship between an infant and his or her parents, an adult's spouse (or equivalent) tends to be the primary attachment figure (Hazan and Shaver,

1990, 1994) on whom a person relies for comfort and security and who is in a unique position to influence his or her identity development. In the initial few years of a romantic partnership, adults seek physical closeness both to satisfy their sexual attraction and their need for comfort and emotional support. At this stage, they typically become a safe haven (Bowlby, 1982; Collins and Feeney, 2000) for each other, providing care and support when the other is in distress. Over time, if they also encourage one another's exploratory behavior, partners may become a secure base (Bowlby, 1988) for each other.

Someone comes to regard another person as a secure base when he or she experiences the other as both dependably supportive and encouraging of his or her exploratory behavior.

Exploratory behavior involves moving away from the secure base to explore the wider environment, take on challenges and risks, and develop (Bowlby, 1988; Feeney, 2004). In adults, this can take many forms and occur across life domains (e.g., trying a new sport, traveling to an unknown city, making new friendships, making a risky career move, etc.). Such exploration can provoke anxiety, for example in relation to facing uncertainty or the possibility of failure.

Anxiety, in turn, can lead a person to renounce exploration and return to safer ground. A person acts as a secure base for another when they encourage exploration *and* provide a safe environment that soothes the anxiety associated with exploration. It is not the amount, frequency, or quality of encouragement and comfort provided that makes one a secure base for another person, however, but that person's perception that one is a reliable source of both. A secure base is not something one offers, it is something one becomes—in someone else's mind (Bowlby, 1988). We highlight the secure-base function of relationship partners here because it relates to identity development and emerged as a sensitizing concept (Bowen, 2008) during our data analysis, thereby orienting our interpretation of the study findings.

Regarding primary attachment figures as a secure base fosters identity development because it is through novel explorations that we develop our sense of who we are (Kamptner, 1988; Lapsley, Rice, and FitzGerald, 1990; Rice, 1990). For instance, clients who experienced their career counselors as a secure base engaged in more career exploration than those who did not (Littman-Ovadia, 2008), and career exploration is the main avenue for professional identity development. The construct of a secure base is thus especially pertinent to studies of identity. Yet in an extensive review, Barsade et al. (2009: 150) noted, “We could not find even one article about this construct published in prominent journals within organizational behavior.”

Although some research on the fringes of organizational scholarship applies attachment theory to an organizational context, it does so in a way that portrays attachment as an individual attribute cemented through early childhood relationships that influences outcomes such as a person’s organizational commitment (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007; Scrima et al., 2015), job performance (Neustadt, Chamorro-Premuzic, and Furnham, 2011), feedback-seeking behavior (We et al., 2014), and the quality of their relationship with their supervisor (Towler and Stuhlmacher, 2013; Frazier et al., 2015). This focus is restrictive, because it reduces an inherently relational theory to an individual-level personality-like trait (Fraley and Shaver, 2000). It also ignores a large body of research showing that early patterns of attachment, although they provide templates for later relationships, are not stable traits and do not fully determine our attachment patterns and development as adults. Rather, such patterns can vary depending on those with whom we have close relationships and can also vary across time with the same interaction partner (Hazan and Shaver, 1987; Kobak and Hazan, 1991; Sibley, Fischer, and Liu, 2005; Fraley et al., 2011).

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In looking at dual-career couples from a dyadic perspective, our study heeds the essential relational nature of attachment and allows for a rich examination of how people in a romantic relationship develop their professional identities. It also aims to build a bridge between attachment theory and mainstream organizational scholarship that has long been called for.

Methods

Research Sample and Data Collection

We recruited couples for this study from the alumni population of a global business school. In line with Pixely's (2009b) recommendation for identifying dual-career couples, we first asked people to self-identify as members of one by e-mailing to invite them to participate in a study of "the careers and lives of dual-career couples." Those who expressed interest were asked to send us a copy of their and their partner's résumés. This allowed us to ensure that they met our criteria of having careers (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1976) before we proceeded to the interview stage.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

In total, 50 couples participated in the study. An overview of their demographics and careers is shown in table 1. Although we did not limit our sampling by sexual orientation, all the couples who volunteered and met our study criteria were heterosexual. Of the 50 couples, 33 lived in Europe, 4 in the Middle East, 3 in Asia/Australasia, and 10 in North America; 25 were mixed nationality couples. All except 8 couples were married, and the length of couples' relationships ranged from 2 to 30 years with an average of 16 years. Informants' ages ranged from 27 to 61 with an average of 47. As a result, our sample encompasses people whose careers were well under way but at different stages. Representative junior jobs held by informants include managing director in an investment bank or a team manager in a corporation.

Representative senior jobs include CEO of a large corporation or the founder of an entrepreneurial venture.

We interviewed each member of a couple separately and assured the individuals that the content of their conversation would be kept confidential, including from their partner. We based the interview protocol on the life-story technique (Atkinson, 1998), but rather than focusing on informants' entire lives we focused on the life of their couple. The semi-structured protocol included questions about the couple and its development, the careers of each member of the couple and their development, and interactions between careers and the couple. The full interview protocol can be found in the Online Appendix,

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>. We also left space for people to describe their experience in the couple. All interviews were voice recorded with permission and professionally transcribed. In this article, we disguise names, dates, locations, and specific roles to protect the anonymity of the research informants. We identify informants by a code that includes the number of the couple in the dataset, the informant's gender, and the number of years the couple had been together. For example, 3M5Y is a male informant in couple 3, which had been together for 5 years; 17F16Y is a female informant in couple 17, which had been together for 16 years.

Data Analysis

We employed grounded theory techniques (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) for our data collection and analysis. This involved collecting and analyzing data in parallel and moving inductively among our growing dataset, our emerging theoretical framework, and bodies of established literature that could inform our data collection and analysis.

Data collection unfolded over the course of 2013-14. As is usual in data collection based on a grounded theory method, patterns and variations that emerged during early data collection shaped the protocol for later interviews (Spradley, 1979). For example, during the first eight interviews, the theme of how couples described their interdependencies emerged. This led us to include more probing questions in subsequent interviews to elicit people's accounts of these interdependencies and to determine whether and to what extent partners of a couple had a shared account. By the time we interviewed the 26th couple, the protocol was stable and remained so for the rest of data collection. By the 40th couple, no new topics and themes emerged, suggesting that we were approaching theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). After interviewing ten more couples confirmed it, we stopped collecting data.

For the sake of clarity, we describe our iterative data analysis as a set of sequential steps. In the first step, we coded the interview transcripts of a small number of couples. For each couple, we first coded the partners' transcripts separately and then reviewed the two transcripts side by side to code the couple at the dyadic level of analysis. At this level, we coded for instances of (dis)agreement or variation between the partners; for example, we coded for (dis)agreement in how partners described a turning point or significant event (e.g., a geographic move). At this stage, our codes were descriptive and closely reflected terms and descriptions used by the informants themselves (Locke, 2001). Having coded the transcripts independently, we then jointly discussed the couples to reach a consensual coding for each couple as a dyad. Initially these meetings were time intensive as we developed and refined themes, built a coding scheme, and made sense of the data. As our understanding of the data developed and our coding scheme solidified, our independent coding of the transcripts became more congruent and the

consensual coding more rapid. We repeated this step throughout data collection; each iteration typically involved coding four couples and thus eight interview transcripts.

In the next step, we moved to axial coding (Locke, 2001), which involved looking for themes among the descriptive codes, grouping codes based on similarities and differences, and abstracting groups to theoretical constructs. To illustrate, approximately a third of the way into our data collection and analysis we had several descriptive codes that referred to how people perceived their partner to encourage them to take risks in their career and provide an anchor from which they could more confidently and fully engage in their career. Concurrently, we were reviewing the psychodynamic literature, which led us to attachment theory and the construct of a secure base. That construct immediately struck us as closely relating to a cluster of our descriptive codes and enabled us to see the relatedness between the aforementioned codes. This insight led us to use the concept of secure base as a sensitizing concept (Blumer, 1954; Bowen, 2008), which guided our analysis of patterns that had emerged from our data. We then used these patterns to inform and extend the concept of a secure base. Applying this method thus led to a generative moment in our research (Carlsen and Dutton, 2011).

Once the data collection was complete, we met for an intensive week to distill an overarching theoretical model by relating the analytic categories to one another. During that time, we repeatedly returned to the transcripts and the literature to ensure that our theoretical model accurately represented the data and built on and extended existing theory. After drafting our model, we conducted member checks with eight informants who verified our key interpretations and conclusions.

Findings

Overview

At the core of our theoretical model is the concept of a couple's secure-base structure. We found that whether couples had a unidirectional secure-base structure, in which only one partner regarded the other as a secure base, or a bidirectional secure-base structure, in which both partners regarded each other as a secure base, was key to how couples shaped or constrained the development of each other's professional identities and how they experienced the relationship between those identities.¹ Unidirectional secure-base couples experienced the relationship between their professional identities as conflictual. They regarded the development of one partner's professional identity as an infringement on the development of the other's. In these couples the partner who received but did not provide a secure base developed their professional identity, progressing toward an individuated one, while the partner who provided but did not receive the secure base foreclosed their professional identity, committing to a professional identity without exploring alternatives. Bidirectional secure-base couples experienced the relationship between their professional identities as enhancing. They regarded the development of one partner's professional identity as benefiting the development of the other's. In these couples, partners not only engaged in professional identity development but also expanded how they defined themselves as professionals by internalizing attributes of their partner's professional identity into their own.

Interpersonal Secure-base Structure

In some couples only one partner perceived the other as a secure base, whereas in others, both partners did. We labeled these couples, respectively, as having a unidirectional and a

¹ There were no couples in our sample in which neither partner provided a secure base to the other. Theoretically, such no-secure-base couples should be possible, yet our findings suggest that they might not be viable.

bidirectional interpersonal secure-base structure. At the time of interview, 21 couples had a unidirectional secure-base structure (split roughly equally between couples in which the man was the secure base and those in which the woman was), and 29 were bidirectional secure-base couples. Our methodology does not allow us to assert whether these numbers are representative of the prevalence of unidirectional and bidirectional secure-base structures among dual-career couples in general, nor do we use them as part of our analysis or theory building. We simply report them here to give the reader a more detailed description of our data. For additional illustrations of couples with these two secure-base structures see table 2.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Unidirectional secure-base structure. In unidirectional couples only one member reported experiencing their partner as a secure base that encouraged exploratory behavior and provided a dependable safe environment to retreat from exploration when it became distressing. Marion (49F17Y), who perceived Mark (49M17Y) as her secure base, effusively described how much he had encouraged her exploration throughout their 17-year relationship: “right from the beginning he’s been incredibly encouraging of my career, of what I want to do with my life. I’ve always been very ambitious but haven’t taken a straight path. Mark encourages me to think laterally, to get out there and just try things.” While Marion engaged in much exploration in her career, making several non-linear moves, she was not always successful. She described one episode that occurred five years prior to our interview:

I really wanted to try this job, but it was a stretch and ultimately, I failed [and was fired]. It was a real crash, I mean I was very very down. It was hard to get up again, but Mark was my anchor. [*What did he do?*] He listened, he supported me, I felt he shared my pain, but you know he never pitied me. He pushed me to get back out there, and now I have the job of my dreams, it’s thanks to him.

Marion describes Mark as providing both an “anchor” and a “push” at an anxiety-provoking moment. This combination illustrates the key feature of a secure base, the availability for retreat and encouragement to move away from the safety of the relationship to explore new and potentially risky ground even after a setback.

While Marion experienced Mark as her secure base, Mark did not see her as a secure base for him. When asked about Marion’s role in Mark’s life course, Mark talked at length about *his* role in *her* development and career: “I’ve really spent a lot of time and energy supporting Marion. I want her to be happy and do well. She’s ambitious, you know. Being her cheerleader is a big role for me.” When asked whether she had played a role in his development, he took a long pause, then said, “Honestly, I think it’s quite one-sided. I know she is proud of what I’ve done and what I’ve achieved, but she has not really given me any specific support. I guess I’ve just got on with it.” Marion echoed the asymmetry when asked about her role in Mark’s career and identity development. Her reaction to the question was a nervous laugh. “Hmm, that’s a good question,” she said. “You’d have to ask Mark. I really don’t know. Maybe I should ask him.” It seemed like a question that she had either never considered or felt uncomfortable answering.

In another unidirectional couple, Olaf (42M11Y) experienced Olga (42F11Y) as a secure base, but Olga did not find a secure base in him. Unlike Marion in the previous example, Olaf had taken a seemingly linear career path, working with the same firm during all of the 11 years he had been with Olga. He had, however, engaged in much exploration—taking on challenging projects in new domains and lateral moves that had eventually accelerated his ascent. He attributed his appetite for risk to Olga’s encouragement: “She’s really been amazing. You know, we’ve had a lot on these years: two small kids, marriage, but she’s always spurred me on to take opportunities and seek new ones.” He went on to note Olga’s role in managing the turmoil that

his exploration had created at times. “[When] it’s stressful,” he said, “I rely on her to help me through dealing with that. Being with her is a sanctuary for me.” His use of the word sanctuary alludes to the experience of a secure base as the embodiment of a well-needed temporary retreat from the challenges and anxiety associated with exploration.

Olga, in contrast, felt that Olaf had “a lack of interest in what I want to do, where I want to go.” Alongside his absence of encouragement for her to explore, Olga also lacked a safe environment to retreat to. She recalled taking on a “new project that would allow me to learn about [a new business area].” The project had turned into a “total failure, it really knocked my confidence.” When she turned to Olaf for support “he was sympathetic initially, but he also said he didn’t have time to talk about it. I felt very alone.” She concluded by describing her role in their relationship as follows: “In some ways I think I take the role of mother in our relationship. I give a lot, I feel invested in him doing what he wants, achieving his dreams. . . . I don’t get much of that back from him.” Olga’s depiction of herself as “mother” in the couple ties the unidirectional secure-base structure to the arrangement described in classic attachment studies, which document the asymmetric bond between infants, secure-base receivers, and their primary caregivers, secure-base providers (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1982). Olaf confirmed their psychological division of labor when he noted, “I’ve never really got involved in Olga’s path. I know she has ambition of what she wants to do, but I leave that in her hands.”

Marion and Mark, and Olga and Olaf, are representative of couples who have a unidirectional secure-base structure. From this perspective, their relationship is asymmetric. One member of the couple—in these cases Mark and Olga—was cast in the role of secure-base provider, urging their partner to explore and providing a safe environment to which they could temporarily retreat to modulate the anxiety attendant to exploration. The other member of the

couple—in these cases Marion and Olaf—was cast in the role of secure-base receiver, taking, but not returning, these psychological benefits from the other. This secure-base structure was also static because the partners seemed stuck in their respective roles rather than moving between them in the way that couples who had a bidirectional secure-base structure reported doing.

Bidirectional secure-base structure couples. In bidirectional couples both members reported experiencing each other as a secure base. Carla (45F23Y) and Christian (45M23Y) were one such couple. Christian described how, from the start of their relationship, Carla had urged him to explore and not take a safe path: “She didn’t want me to become a bank director or something very, very safe. For her it was more important for me to find something I would really like and I would be excited about.” Christian recalled a specific period when Carla had encouraged him to “look for new opportunities” as he had become “disenfranchised with being a [professional services employee].” She supported his transition to setting up a new business in a developing country, which Christian described as “an absolute uphill struggle, meaning no demand, no clients, no products, I mean, just a hopeless task.” In addition to encouraging him to venture into a risky area, Carla “provided constant support” for Christian through the long gestation of his new business. “[It] was the most difficult time in [country name],” he said. “Up to [four years after founding it], until I had a breakthrough. Up till then it was really difficult.” Christian attributed the success of his venture, after that long stretch of uncertainty, to Carla’s encouragement and support: “She influenced me in the way that she allowed it to happen. . . . You need to be open for your partner to engage in something that, at the time, did not really look that promising.”

Carla experienced Christian as a secure base as well. She noted that throughout their relationship he had not tried to constrain her but rather “support[ed] [my] free spirit in terms of

my career.” Eighteen months after Christian started his new business, Carla joined two friends to set up what became a large pan-continental business. She recalled how Christian “was extremely supportive, and he really had to put up with a lot.” She went on to explain that “Christian showed a lot of maturity taking up that role. [At the time] we were newly married and these two men [her business partners], because we had no money, we had to start our business, they lived with us all in the same apartment.” Thus the role of being a secure base shifted between Christian and Carla when each needed support or a nudge to move toward novelty. The fluidity in providing and receiving a secure base continued throughout their 23-year relationship. Although neither of them transitioned out of their respective businesses, they both faced setbacks and relied on the other to soothe anxiety and urge exploration. Carla noted, “At work, at some point, I had very difficult situations with my partners. Christian is the closest person I have, so I always talk to him. . . . And then I can get back on my feet, carry on.”

Andreas (40M6Y) and Alice (40F6Y) followed a similar pattern. They had met in their mid-forties, when their careers were well established, relied on each other as a secure base, and fluidly passed this role between themselves. Early in their relationship, Andreas transitioned from heading an international development agency to being a freelancer in his field. “I remember talking to Alice about it,” he recalled. “That when I saw myself on my deathbed, hopefully many decades down the road, and the feeling that I had the opportunity when I was 50 to do something different while I was still active.” He found the move difficult, and he attributed his ability to survive the transition to the safety Alice provided:

What I hadn’t realized was how more than 20 years in [development agency] had actually defined my own sense of who I was, and how much it defined how people saw me. What was extremely difficult to deal with was the sense of being no longer part of an institution, realizing that you no longer projected that institution with your presence, and so your relevance in a situation was directly correlated to what you had to offer. . . . And Alice, you know, our relationship, my relationship with her, the way she encouraged me to take

the leap. . . . It's been essential to have Alice's presence in my life, or our life together, in fact, has been sort of the stability that allowed me to do that. . . . I don't think I'd have been able to survive without Alice.

Andreas's use of the word stability is telling. The stability of having the safety that a secure base affords enables one to explore new and challenging worlds, and through exploration Andreas grew and developed, "surviving" with Alice's help the loss of an institutional identity.

Shortly after Andreas had made his transition to freelancing, Alice, who is a member of her nation's diplomatic corps, sought a post in a war-torn capital where her government's policy forbids diplomats for security reasons to bring their family along. She explained how she had long "wanted to go to [that region] again" but had "hesitated in applying for [city] because I knew it would mean a separate life. But then Andreas very much encouraged me to do it. And then, yes that was difficult to resist." As Alice's secure base, Andreas encouraged her exploration and growth, and she encouraged his. He captured this reciprocity describing the ethos of their relationship: "We mutually work to encourage the other to flourish."

Carla and Christian, and Andreas and Alice, are representative of couples who have a bidirectional secure-base structure. Their relationship is symmetric and fluid. Both members of the couple take the role of secure-base provider and receiver, and thus both give and take psychological resources, passing the roles between each other. In contrast to unidirectional couples who replicate the classic attachment structure of a fixed care-taker and a fixed care-receiver, bidirectional couples created a structure in which both partners could enact both roles.

Interpersonal Professional Identity Dynamics

We found marked differences between how couples in the unidirectional and bidirectional categories experienced the relationship between their two professional identities. We also found

differences in whether and how they felt their professional identities develop. For additional illustrations of these professional identity dynamics see table 3.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Unidirectional couples: Interpersonal professional identity conflict, identity development, and foreclosure. Unidirectional secure-base couples experienced the relationship between their professional identities as conflictual. We define interpersonal identity conflict as occurring when members of the couple come to regard the development of one partner’s professional identity as an infringement on the development of the other’s. As a result of this conflict, the partner who received but did not provide a secure base experienced ongoing professional identity development—defined as the over-time progression toward an individuated professional identity (Marcia, 1966; Erikson, 1978; Dutton, Roberts, and Bednar, 2010). The partner who provided but did not receive the secure base, conversely, experienced professional identity foreclosure—defined as occupying a professional identity not reflecting one’s interests and desires for an indefinite time without exploring desired alternatives (Marcia, 1966; Erikson, 1978).

Ursula (29F23Y) and Ulric (29M23Y) had met during their MBA studies, 23 years before we interviewed them. During this time, Ulric—who perceived Ursula to be a secure base—had progressively developed his professional identity. Having become restless in a corporate job, which he described as “not my natural habitat,” he began to explore options in the entrepreneurial world. Although none of his close family or friends were entrepreneurs, he described being always “drawn to entrepreneurial things” and harboring a long-held dream to “become an entrepreneur.” He noted that Ursula encouraged his journey into entrepreneurship and toward an individuated professional identity, one suited to his values and wishes: “I went

into entrepreneurship because I thought that was the best way for me to create financial independence, to provide an interesting career path for myself, and independence for the family. And Ursula supported that very well, especially at the beginning. She thought it was exciting.”

Ursula—who did not perceive Ulric as a secure base—had what appeared on the surface to be a very successful career. She had risen rapidly through the management ranks of a midsized privately owned agribusiness and was now its CEO. She did not feel successful, however, and experienced her professional identity as stifled. Many times during her interview she referred to alternative paths she could have taken and to the professional she could have become: “I would love to teach, I’d love to work in philanthropy, I’d love to—I mean, there’s just, the list is very, very [long]—I would love to do public policy.” When asked if she had limited herself to support Ulric’s development she replied, “Totally! Yes! Absolutely!” Although Ursula expressed having desired alternatives, such as “doing public policy,” she had not, as she put it in the quote below, “explored” them. As her interests never translated to experiments, she experienced the frustration of a foreclosed professional identity, which cut her off from taking pride in her accomplishments. She described her foreclosed identity path as a treadmill on which she had simply kept walking:

The only thing I have done is woken up every day and got going. What I have right now is a terrific role, and it’s very challenging and very demanding, and I have a lot of responsibility. But I could be doing it in a different context, in a bigger brand, or with bigger headlines out there, in some way, shape, or form, with a bigger public company or—who knows? So I guess that is all quite possible. But I’ve just not explored.

When asked why she had not explored these options, she explicitly attributed her own lack of professional identity development along one of these paths to having supported Ulric’s: “I was underwriting all of his dreams and his risk taking and all the rest.” Not getting any support back, she explained in an exasperated tone, was “very psychologically limiting. All he would have had to say was ‘I’d like you to explore this or that, [and] let me do this, that, and the

other [to enable it],’ but he hasn’t taken that initiative.” Ulric shared her belief that Ursula had supported his professional identity development and he had not reciprocated. As he put it, Ursula’s “options [to develop] have been limited.” He went on to explain, “I chose the entrepreneurial path, and she has been the stable one, and, you know, being married to somebody who’s pursuing an entrepreneurial path is at times stressful.” The stress Ursula carried for Ulric, it seemed, had freed him up and weighed her down. Ursula and Ulric’s case was typical of unidirectional secure-base couples. Partners in these couples narrated interpersonal professional identity conflict as a zero-sum game in which as one partner gained—developed their professional identity—the other partner lost—foreclosed their professional identity. They assumed that the relationship between the professional identities of all dual-career couples was zero sum and that there was no alternative. As Ursula attempted to explain why she and Ulric had fallen into this pattern, she could not see any other way: “Well, you just have to make compromises along the way, don’t you, to make all of that work.”

The case of Rachel (10F13Y) and Rasmus (10M13Y), who met in their mid-thirties following the break-up of their respective first marriages, offers insight into the seemingly intractable nature of interpersonal identity conflict and its emotional facets. Rachel and Rasmus had both established successful careers by the time they met. They were the two youngest members of the executive committee at their company. From the beginning of their relationship, Rachel—who perceived Rasmus to be a secure base—had progressively developed her professional identity. Unlike Ulric in the previous example, Rachel did not make radical career moves but did progress rapidly in her field. Driven by her desire to “become a CFO for a big organization,” she took on roles that were “increasingly challenging and at times a really, really big stretch.” Rachel explained that Rasmus had

... enabled it to happen. I don't think I could have done it without his support. Sometimes he's a cheerleader, like 'you'll be great,' sometimes more of a push like 'I really think you should go for this.' He has almost been in the driving seat of my career. It's also emotional support, if something goes wrong, he's there to support and pick up the pieces.

While recognizing the ways in which he had enabled her professional identity development, she also noted that she had not been able to do the same for him: "I just don't give him enough emotional support; I'm not able to energy-wise. I've come to understand this only very recently. My energy is very much focused on me, and I cannot seem to change this, I'm quite stuck."

Rasmus explained how this arrangement, in which he provided a secure base to Rachel that was not reciprocated, put their professional identities into conflict. He felt that he could not develop his professional identity while she developed hers: "She can merge two \$10 billion companies. She can manage a large team. She will be successful, but the price is very, very heavy—very, very heavy to pay." [*What is the price?*] "I cannot also push myself; I cannot also develop, because all my energy is on supporting and encouraging her."

Rasmus's view that energy spent on the other is taken away from the self reflects the zero-sum portrait of identity conflict that emerged from unidirectional couples' accounts. These couples felt there was only enough energy in the couple to support the development of one partner's professional identity. As a result, Rasmus had foreclosed his professional identity since getting together with Rachel: "Since almost 10 years," he reported, "I've been in my comfort zone professionally. I've just been on a track, not taking risks. I've done well, but I've not looked around, sought challenging options, just really kept my head down." This cognitive understanding of interpersonal identity conflict as limiting yet inevitable had strong emotions associated with it. Rachel explained that she felt "guilty that who I am as a professional, the way I am, stops Rasmus from becoming more." Although Rasmus described feeling "resigned to the

dynamic between us. I think it's just my role to be the supporting one," he also described facing a situation that could develop his professional identity to become his company's chairman:

Now I'm the number two of [company name], and it's obvious that the deal is that if I'm successful in four or five years I should become the chairman, but I'm not sure I want the job. Or, it's not really a question of want, but to go for this position, to really stretch myself here, I will need Rachel. I will need her next to me strong psychologically. If she could do this, then she will help me to be strong and take the risk and do it.

Here Rasmus explains that he has foreclosed his identity not because he has no wishes or options to explore, but because it feels impossible to "take the risk" without Rachel's support.

The experiences of a third unidirectional secure-base couple, Vivienne (30F23Y) and Victor (30M23Y), provide insights into how interpersonal identity conflict affects people's professional identities over the long term. Victor, the European vice president of a large fast-moving consumer goods company, perceived Vivienne, an executive coach, as a secure base for him, but Vivienne did not see Victor as a secure base for her. Victor and Vivienne described having always experienced their professional identities to be in conflict. From the start of his career, Victor had a clear identity development path in mind that he achieved with Vivienne's encouragement. "I always knew I wanted to become a general manager," he stated. This path, however, moved through "lots of country changes [and required] Vivienne to sacrifice quite a bit in her career, to the point where we weren't sure whether we should stay together [because] she couldn't fulfill what she want[ed] to." For Vivienne to support Victor's professional identity development, she needed to follow him to a new location roughly every three years and, in her words, "become an accompanying spouse, which I hated. I hate it." Vivienne had a successful career as an executive coach nevertheless, which "worked because it was very flexible." The problem with this flexibility for Vivienne was that she foreclosed her professional identity for so long that she eventually felt she had "lost it." "I was too flexible, to a degree where I lost my

working identity, definitely I lost it. And the thing I'm trying to figure out is my professional identity, where am I going." Being "stuck" as an itinerant executive coach for over 20 years had left Vivienne feeling underdeveloped and unsure about her professional sense of self. Although Victor and Vivienne stayed together and had recently, as Vivienne described, "bought new wedding rings to celebrate our next 20 years together," professionally Victor had become what he had hoped and was now "master of my own agenda," while Vivienne said she carried "a huge kind of frustration about my professional life."

Like other unidirectional couples, Ursula and Ulrich, Rachel and Rasmus, and Vivienne and Victor occupied set psychological roles they had long cast each other in—one as a secure-base provider and the other as a secure-base receiver. This structure was associated with a seemingly intractable interpersonal identity conflict that couples narrated as a zero-sum game and that shaped and constrained who each became as a professional and how they felt about it. In such couples, the person who benefited from but did not provide a secure base—Ulrich, Rachel, and Victor in the cases above—experienced professional identity development and progressively became more individuated. The person who provided but did not benefit from a secure base—Ursula, Rasmus, and Vivienne here—experienced identity foreclosure and remained committed to a professional identity even when they had desired alternatives.

Bidirectional couples: Interpersonal professional identity enhancement, identity development, and expansion. In contrast to unidirectional couples, bidirectional secure-base couples described the relationship between their professional identities as enhancing. We define interpersonal identity enhancement as occurring when members of the couple come to regard the development of one partner's professional identity as benefiting the development of the other's. As a result of this enhancement, both partners kept developing their professional identity,

shaping who each became as a professional in a positive way. Furthermore, unlike unidirectional couples, we found that both partners in bidirectional couples expanded their professional identity by internalizing attributes of their partner's into their own.

Elizabeth (3F21Y) and Eduardo (3M21Y) met at work in their mid-twenties. Like other members of bidirectional secure-base couples, both reported that they had progressively developed their professional identities and attributed their ability to do so to each other. After working in international relations for the first eight years of her career, Elizabeth “homed in on communications and PR as the path I really wanted to pursue.” Once on this path, she described her “steady progression as I developed and grew my roles” in blue chip companies to her current position when she “became an Executive Committee member heading up PR and communications of [current company name],” which was a “goal that I had for a long time.” Elizabeth stressed that Eduardo was key to her professional identity development from the early days of their relationship: “One of the things I loved about Eduardo from the beginning was that he’s always believed in me, encouraged me to reach for the moon, and to lean into uncertainty. I don’t believe I would have become a business leader without him.”

Eduardo initially followed a track similar to Elizabeth’s until “seven years ago, as I became more senior and I was doing more mentoring and leading teams, I realized that my passion lay in coaching others. I wanted to do it full time, to become an executive coach, so I did the [coaching training] and made that transition.” Eduardo also highlighted Elizabeth’s role in his development, noting that she “has never tried to hold me back or direct my path. She’s pushed me for sure, but the pushing has been towards figuring out and pursuing what I really want to do.” He went on to explain, “I’m truly happy now professionally. I feel in the right place; I’ve found my calling. It’s in no small measure due to Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth and Eduardo did not experience each other's identity development as conflicting, nor did they interpret the relationship between their professional identities as neutral. They regarded the relationship as enhancing. As Eduardo explained, "We've never held each other back. There have been tough times along the way of course, but neither of us have sacrificed for the other. Instead we have both become much more than we could ever have done alone. As one of us has grown we have both grown." This quote highlights how bidirectional couples narrated interpersonal professional identity enhancement as a positive sum game, in which one person's professional identity development had a positive impact on the development of the other. Elizabeth mirrored Eduardo's sentiment when she said,

We feed off each other's development. I'll give you an example. [Early in our careers] Eduardo wanted to become a head of external relations, and I encouraged him to go for the role. It was a stretch but he got it, and I could see he was thriving, really growing. At the time I was a bit lost, I wasn't sure about my direction. So seeing him and his path was important to me, it gave me the inspiration to rethink my direction. And that is when I really homed in on the goal of becoming a leader in the public relations of a firm.

This quote reveals how when Elizabeth witnessed the positive impact professional identity development had on Eduardo it benefited her by giving her inspiration to focus on her own professional identity development, on "becoming a leader" in public relations.

Elizabeth and Eduardo not only experienced each other as shaping who they became as professionals in a beneficial way, but they also defined themselves differently as professionals because of their relationship and reported internalizing attributes of each other's professional identity into their own. Elizabeth, for example, described how she had "taken" Eduardo's coaching identity and incorporated it into her identity as a leader:

I'm in a senior leadership position now, and people in my team sometimes call me coach. I get quite a bit of feedback that I'm a good coach. And I would never have expected that. I've always been very direct, quite pushy. But I realize it's not from me. I've taken that piece of Eduardo inside myself and have become a better leader for it.

When probed as to how this had happened, Elizabeth noted, “I haven’t consciously studied him or tried to imitate. I don’t know, perhaps we just naturally become more of each other over time.” Elizabeth’s expressed lack of conscious role modeling or imitation was common across members of bidirectional couples, suggesting that the process of internalization was at least partly unconscious. For his part, Eduardo explained that he had internalized the “creativity which Elizabeth has always had. Everyone knows her as a creative manager. At the beginning [of her career] this was about products, now it’s more around strategy, solutions.” Eduardo described how in his coaching practice he had developed a “focus on creativity. Sometimes I find myself saying things to, or asking things of, a client and I think ‘that’s just what Elizabeth would say.’ It’s as if in that moment, I am channeling her. And I’ve now started to think of myself as a creative coach.”

The case of Fadi (48M22Y) and Fadhila (48F22Y), who met in their late twenties, offers further insight into the dynamics of interpersonal professional identity enhancement. Unlike people whose professional identity development involved major career transitions, Fadi and Fadhila had both explored and developed along set career tracks. Fadi said he had “always been an advertising guy. I wanted to become known in the field, to manage big clients, to lead a big team. I’ve been lucky to be on that path and achieved that, although there are still things I want to do, ways I want to grow.” For her part, Fadhila was “in the civil service. From an early age, I wanted to be doing something that matters in government. I’ve worked in an advisory role to politicians and taken on bigger and bigger roles to eventually become a senior special advisor.”

Fadi and Fadhila experienced their professional identities as being in an enhancing relationship. As Fadhila explained, “I think our careers have benefited each other’s in a very positive way. I feel I’ve become a better version of myself, and got further along a path than I

could have done alone.” Fadi also noted that “although I’ve not made any radical career changes, if I think back 20 years I could never have imagined the journey I’ve been on. Who I’ve become professionally has been enormously shaped by Fadhila. I do think that we have fed off each other’s growth.” Fadi’s use of the phrase “fed off each other’s growth” points to the positive-sum narrative these couples shared, feeling they had benefited from each other’s development. It also contrasts with the imagery in unidirectional couples’ accounts, whose members’ professional identities appeared fenced off in ways that contained one and constrained the other.

In addition to supporting each other, Fadi and Fadhila also saw themselves as professionals differently because of their relationship. Fadi described how he had internalized Fadhila’s special advisor identity and how this had shaped his identity as an “advertising man”: “In some ways I’m not your classic advertising man. My clients have commented that I’m more discrete, I advise in the background rather than push myself in their faces ‘sell, sell, sell.’ When I get those comments, I can see a piece of Fadhila the Special Advisor in me.” Fadhila talked about how she got feedback on being analytical, an attribute she associated more with Fadi’s professional identity than her own: “Fadi has always been very analytical, and of course he’s developed that more because of his career. I’ve never thought of myself as analytical; I’m more the people person. But I have gotten feedback that I’m an analytical advisor.”

The experiences of a third bidirectional couple, Bachir (50M27Y) and Bala (50F27Y), who met in their mid-twenties, offers insight into how bidirectional couples narrate their professional identity development over time and the mutual rewards it brings. Like other members of bidirectional secure-base couples, both Bala and Bachir reported that they had progressively developed their professional identities. Bachir had frequently moved between various roles in his firm, which had an up-or-out promotion system and was “a young man’s

pool, average age 30. The trick is how to stay relevant. . . . I've probably moved every three years, but many of my roles have been international. . . . I've always enjoyed it and have eventually become Managing Partner [in the firm]." Meanwhile, Bala had taken on various political roles, which she described as "my calling"; for example, she told the story of how "just after the [9/11 attacks she was promoted] into a difficult brief of overseas development, and within six weeks having to go out to [war-torn country] on my own. . . . It was a very *scary* point. I've also become [political title], which is obviously a very senior role, and I've been made [political title]." Both credited the other as encouraging and in many ways enabling their professional identity development. Bala noted Bachir's response when she was offered her first senior political role while their children were in elementary school: "He said, 'Well, you're ridiculous to even think twice—this is a promotion, you've got to go for it. You will cope, we will cope.' And he was right."

As Bala noted, Bachir's professional identity development had not impinged on her own: "To be honest with you, I don't think it has held me back." Instead, Bachir summarized how their individual identity development had enhanced the other, saying "I might have earned more than Bala, but at the end of the day, becoming a [political title] is like having a gold medal. . . . That's something that's more valuable, in one sense, than money." Thus, as a couple, Bachir and Bala were jointly wealthy and acclaimed, things that both could enjoy but neither, in their minds, could have accrued alone. Bala and Bachir's case was exemplary of bidirectional couples who rejected the notion that the professional identity development of one partner occurred at the expense of the other. Rather, they narrated it as being done on behalf of the couple such that both partners achieved and grew more together than they could have independently.

Like other bidirectional couples, Elizabeth and Eduardo, Fadi and Fadhila, and Bala and Bachir dynamically occupied the psychological roles of secure-base provider and receiver. This sharing of roles was associated with an enhancing relationship between their professional identities, in which both developed and experienced each other's professional identity development as beneficial to their own. By internalizing attributes of each other's professional identity into their own, they expanded how they defined themselves as professionals.

Discussion

Building on these findings, we offer a model, depicted in figure 1, that reveals the psychological underpinnings of how members of dual-career couples affect each other's professional identity and how they experience those identities' interaction. The model portrays a couple's secure-base structure as the key to explaining the relationship between each member of the couple's professional identity and that identity's development.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

We found that couples had one of two distinct secure-base structures: unidirectional or bidirectional. We portray these structures as the foundational layer in our model to suggest that each provides a "terroir" of sorts, a unique ground well suited (or inhospitable) to a certain kind of relation and identity development. The unidirectional secure-base structure underpins an asymmetrical relationship in which one partner firmly takes on the role, not just the work, of supporting the other's professional development. While the recipient of such support might acknowledge and appreciate it, he or she does not reciprocate. This unidirectional structure mirrors, among romantically involved adults, the dyadic structure described in classic attachment studies that document the bond and developmental relationship between infants and their primary

caregivers (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1982). The second secure-base structure that emerged from our findings, which to the best of our knowledge has not been described in the attachment literature thus far, is what we termed the bidirectional secure-base structure. This sets up a symmetrical relationship that positions each partner in the couple as both a supporter of the other's development and a recipient of the other's support.

Our model suggests that a couple's secure-base structure grounds and nourishes—or impedes and constrains—the development of one or both partners' professional identities. In the unidirectional couples we studied, the partner who received but did not provide a secure base engaged in professional identity development, progressing toward an individuated professional identity over time (Erikson, 1978). This development was manifest in people's stories of seeking and pursuing a path to their desired professional identity even when it involved taking uncertain and risky steps. The presence of a secure-base partner, for these people, was thus integral to their experience of professional becoming (Allport, 1955). Their partners, by contrast, lacking the support and encouragement of a secure base, did not engage in professional identity development. They foreclosed their professional identity instead. Foreclosure was manifest in people's stories of being stuck on a professional path that might bring objective success and yet felt constraining and limiting, as if the commitment to being a non-reciprocated secure base for one's partner somewhat divorced **one** from his or her desired professional self. This professional identity foreclosure is related to the foreclosure Erikson (1978) documented in adolescents who locked themselves onto a life path determined by their family and society rather than developing an individuated, deliberately chosen life path and accompanying identity. The key difference is that while foreclosure in adolescents is assumed to be largely unconscious (Marcia, 1966; Erikson, 1978), the adults in our study were often painfully conscious that they had foreclosed

Commented [Office2]: I reverted to the original wording which was more accurate.

their professional identities and locked themselves onto a path that drained their own professional identity development. We hypothesize that such identity foreclosure is caused not simply by the absence of a secure base but also by the dyadic secure-base structure of the couple and the way this structure, in turn, influences how the members of the couple experience the relationship between their professional identities.

Couples with a unidirectional secure-base structure experienced the relationship between their professional identities as conflictual. Interpersonal identity conflict, we theorize, occurs when members of the couple come to regard the development of one partner's professional identity as an infringement on the development of the other's. This conflict is related to intra-individual identity conflict (Horton, Bayerl, and Jacobs, 2014; Ramarajan, 2015), which occurs when an individual holds two identities whose meanings, values, and behaviors cannot be simultaneously expressed without conflict, such as being a woman and a physics student (Settles, 2004). To avoid such conflict, an individual either draws clear time and space boundaries between the identities or prioritizes the enactment and development of one over the other (Stryker and Burke, 2000; Burke and Stets, 2009). At the interpersonal level, the couples we studied prioritized the professional identity development of one member at the expense of the other, whose professional identity foreclosure was both an effect and a cause of this conflict.

Like the members of unidirectional couples whose partners provided a secure base, both members of bidirectional couples engaged in professional identity development. Thus in all the couples we studied, professional identity development was contingent on having a secure-base partner. But members of bidirectional secure-base couples experienced an additional benefit: they came to see themselves differently as professionals because of their relationship. Members of these couples internalized attributes of each other's professional identity and expanded how

they defined themselves as professionals. This professional identity expansion occurred, we suggest, through mutual introjection, which is the process of internalizing attributes, narratives, and ideologies from others and incorporating them into one's own sense of self to bolster or protect it (Ogden, 1979; Sandler, 1987; Petriglieri, Petriglieri, and Wood, 2017). In dual-career couples, introjection bolstered members' professional identity by expanding the meanings attributed to it. Introjection only occurred in bidirectional couples, suggesting that it is contingent on the secure base structure of the couple rather than simply regarding one's partner as a secure base. Members of bidirectional couples were thus individuated but also connected to their partners through the mutual introjection of common professional identity attributes, which created an area of overlap between the content of the two partners' professional identities.

Couples with a bidirectional secure base structure experienced the relationship between their professional identities as enhancing. Interpersonal identity enhancement occurs, we theorize, when members of the couple experience the development of one partner's professional identity as benefiting the development of the other's. This enhancement took place at the interpersonal level. Like the conflict we described above, it is distinct from but related to intra-individual identity enhancement, which refers to holding two identities that bring benefits to each other when an individual expresses them, such as using the skills and resources gained from being a mother to serve one's identity as a manager and vice versa (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006; Rothbard and Ramarajan, 2009). At the individual level, identity enhancement benefits both partners' identities. Similarly, we found that interpersonal identity enhancement benefited the professional identities of both members of the couple. First, couples experienced a multiplicative effect of their professional identity development. Couples reported that as they drew inspiration from and fed off each other's identity development, both partners developed their identities more

Commented [JF3]: Edits okay?

No I reverted to the original

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Commented [JF5]: Is this word correct here? I thought the sentence was about intra-individual enhancement, which benefits "both identities."

Yes its correct

than they could have done alone. Second, as mentioned above, members of bidirectional couples expanded how they defined themselves as professionals to incorporate aspects of their partner's professional identity.

Theoretically, these relational dynamics reveal that in replicating a parent-child attachment structure, unidirectional couples deprive both members a part of the self—the traditional “adult” self as provider of a secure base or the traditional “child” self as receiver of a secure base. Bowlby (1988: 62) noted that all humans require secure bases from “cradle to grave.” This replication also denies these couples a kind of adult intimacy unlike that of the parent-child relationship, the kind that involves full reciprocity in psychological interactions and the experience of being deeply connected to who the other person is (Kantor, 1999). When one member of a unidirectional couple engages in professional identity development, we have shown, they do so with the support of their partner but not in a way that integrates their partner into their self-concept.

Rather than replicating the parent-child attachment structure, couples with a bidirectional secure-base structure applied it to their adult relationship. In doing so, members of the couple fluidly move between occupying the adult position of being a secure-base provider and the child position of being a secure-base receiver. In developmental terms, this enables both partners to be their full selves. It also makes members of bidirectional couples intimately connected, such that their identity development is both enabled by and dependent on the other—manifested in partners' becoming themselves, in part, by introjecting features of the other's professional identity into their own.

Theoretical Implications

The two most novel aspects of our model are that it theorizes identity dynamics in a fully relational way and brings attachment theory to bear on theories of professional identity development and the maintenance of dual careers.

Professional identity development. Our dyad-level analysis including both partners in dual-career couples allowed us to investigate professional identity development in a truly relational way and to parse out what aspects of identity development are contingent on simply receiving certain resources from another person and what aspects of development are contingent on features of the relationship itself. By taking a dyadic approach, we revealed important dynamics that could not have been seen through an individual-level lens. From an individual-level perspective, attachment theory, along with theories of identity development, would predict that the key factor encouraging the exploration that fosters identity development would be receiving a secure base from one's partner. From this perspective, the people who receive a secure base from their partner should experience identity development, and those who do not receive a secure base from their partner should experience identity foreclosure. Our theoretical model, however, shows this prediction to be incomplete. First, our model explains why the identity development process is experienced and narrated differently by secure-base receivers depending on whether they are also secure-base providers. In dual-career couples, the identity development process of both partners in bidirectional secure-base couples included what we termed professional identity expansion, whereby they internalized attributes of each other's professional identity into their own; in contrast, no such identity expansion was present in members of unidirectional secure-base couples. Second, by taking a dyadic approach, we were able to examine how the couple perceived the relationship between their two professional

identities either as one of conflict or one of enhancement. These novel constructs are an important piece of the puzzle of identity development. For instance, our findings suggest that, just as identity development is not caused by the presence of a secure base per se, identity foreclosure is not caused by the absence of a secure base, but rather by the perception that identity development is a zero-sum game for the couple so that one's exploration and development would come at the cost of the exploration and development of one's partner. This zero-sum conceptualization is similar to that found between groups who are locked into intractable identity conflicts (Fiol, Pratt, and O'Connor, 2009).

Using attachment theory, we were able to show how a couple's secure-base structure enables or constrains the professional identity development of its members. Identity development was originally conceptualized as a gradual process of moving away from an unexamined conformity to the expectations of others (e.g., parents, mentors, peers, organizations, society at large) toward an individuated sense of self rooted in one's own desires (Marcia, 1966; Erikson, 1978; Kegan, 1983. This process of individuation happens through exploring a variety of identity options to refine one's understanding of one's self and to find the options that best locate one in society and feel most authentic. We contribute to this line of work by showing the key role of a secure-base relationship in promoting the exploration that is essential to drive this identity development. Moreover, our findings flesh out and illustrate the opposite experience of foreclosing one's identity. This is an important contribution because of the paucity of research on identity foreclosure in adults. Our informants attributed foreclosing their professional identities to their experience of interpersonal identity conflict. They said that if they were to explore and develop, this development would be at odds with their partner's and might therefore harm the relationship.

While existing work has demonstrated how professional relationships can shape people's professional identity (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006; Petriglieri, Petriglieri, and Wood, 2017), we show how a non-work relationship can do so. This finding contributes to the growing consensus that work and family are no longer separate worlds (Kanter, 1977), distinct from and unaffected by each other (Ramarajan and Reid, 2013).

Our finding that a couple's secure-base structure affects not only their professional identity development but also how they experience their work identities as conflicting with or enhancing each other is our third theoretical contribution to identity research. Existing literature has devoted much attention to understanding the relationships among individuals' multiple identities (e.g. Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2009; Rothbard and Ramarajan, 2009; Creed, DeJordy, and Lok, 2010). This research has led to valuable insights into the nature and effects of intra-individual identity conflict and enhancement. For instance, we know that one way individuals negotiate their identity conflicts is by prioritizing one identity over the other (Greenhaus and Powell, 2003; Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2006) and that when a person simultaneously expresses two enhancing identities, he or she experiences an increase in performance and personal growth (Pratt and Foreman, 2000; Rothbard and Ramarajan, 2009; Ramarajan, 2015). Our new constructs of interpersonal identity conflict and enhancement show effects that are similar but at the dyadic level: rather than a person prioritizing one of his or her identities over another, a couple prioritizes the development of one member's identity over the development of the other member's identity; and rather than an individual experiencing increases in performance or personal growth, the couple experiences such benefits. We demonstrate that these effects transcend the individual level of analysis and show how interpersonal identity configurations affect individuals' professional identity development.

Dual-career couples. The majority of existing conceptualizations about how couples sustain dual careers concern the practical strategies that partners use to manage and prioritize those careers vis-à-vis each other (Hertz, 1986; Becker and Moen, 1999; Pixley, 2009b; Clarke, 2015). We expand this focus to encompass the ways that members of dual-career couples influence who each partner becomes as a professional (Allport, 1955). We show that by providing a secure base, people can influence each other's professional identity development and, in some cases, expand the content of their partners' professional identities with their own attributes. Thus, while current theories frame partners as shaping each other's careers, our theory reframes partners as shaping each other's working selves.

Perhaps our most significant contribution to theory on dual-career couples stems from our insight that couples have either a unidirectional or bidirectional secure-base structure, which drives interpersonal professional identity conflict or enhancement, respectively. Existing work on dual-career couples is steeped in the language of trade-offs and compromises, underpinned by an implicit assumption that managing two demanding careers is a zero-sum game (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1976; Hertz, 1986; Blair-Loy, 2003; Stone, 2007; Clarke, 2015). Although our analysis of unidirectional secure-base couples aligns with this work, our analysis of bidirectional couples reveals they have a different interpretation of their lives and work, their individual selves, and each other. Their subjective experience of having dual careers was that they had grown and achieved more as a couple than they could have alone. Dual-career researchers might thus reframe the question of how couples can sustain dual careers to ask how and when couples can benefit from having dual careers.

While not explicitly focused on gender, our results offer important insights to gender scholarship, the lens used by most existing work on dual-career couples. We found that sex

differences had no bearing on whether a person provided a secure base to their partner (i.e., men and women played the role of secure-base providers in almost equal numbers) and thus no bearing on whether a person developed or foreclosed their professional identity. This result challenges common assumptions about the importance of sex differences to understanding gender dynamics: in our case, the assumption might suggest that women are usually caretakers and nurturers in marital relationships while men are more likely to develop their professional identity. Research suggests that lay conceptions of men and women are that they are categorically different (Haslam, Rothschild, and Ernst, 2000; Cole et al., 2007), but gender scholars have long challenged the sex-differences assumption (Ridgeway, 2001; Ely and Padavic, 2007; Carothers and Reis, 2013; Joel et al., 2015). In this view, gender is a set of cultural beliefs about appropriate roles for men and women, but these cultural beliefs are not uniform; they are dynamically constructed, disrupted, or maintained in particular situations and interactions. The lack of sex differences may be consistent with this latter view because our sample comprises dual-career professionals as opposed to couples with two jobs or with one job and one career. Dual-career couples are “more equal than others” (Hertz, 1986); they share responsibilities for breadwinning and family relationships and as a result are already less like to occupy conventional gender roles. Our study thus invites scholars to think broadly about gender roles in dual-career couples, moving beyond the notion of one sex being more likely to occupy a role and toward considering conditions under which a man or a woman may gravitate toward a role and what function this may serve both partners in the couple.

Attachment theory. While the main contribution of our research is to bring attachment theory to bear on organizational theories, our work also expands this theory. As Bowlby (1988: 62), who coined the term attachment, noted, “All of us from cradle to grave are happiest when life is organized as a series of excursions, long or short, from the secure base provided by our

attachment figure(s).” Despite his intention that attachment theory be applied across the human life span, most work with it has either been in relation to children or has looked at the impact of childhood attachment patterns on adult processes and outcomes (e.g., Schirmer and Lopez, 2001; Pines, 2004). As a result, child–caregiver attachment has become the primary attachment metaphor that scholars use in their research, yet most of us spend significantly more time in adulthood than childhood and have many more attachment figures than our primary caretakers. Our research demonstrates the importance of the attachments people form in adulthood for their continuing identity development. Such adult–adult attachments are not just powerful additions, surrogates, or alternatives to the child–caregiver attachments. They deserve to be treated as a potentially different metaphor, with its host of delights and challenges, opportunities and complications, and original and repeated patterns that scholars would do well to examine.

Although attachment bonds are “shared dyadic programme[s]” (Bowlby, 1982: 377), which can be reciprocal between adults (Hazan and Shaver, 1994), research often uses an individual level of analysis that investigates the impact of attachment on only one partner (e.g., Davidovitz et al., 2007). Even when researchers focus on the dyad to investigate how partners co-create attachment patterns, the reported outcomes (e.g., exploratory behavior and levels of well-being) remain individual (e.g., Feeney, 2004; Hudson et al., 2014). In taking the dyad as the unit of analysis, our study introduces the concept of a secure-base structure and its two different forms: unidirectional or bidirectional. Not only do we label and provide evidence for the bidirectional secure-base structure, but also we show that the form of a couple’s secure-base structure has a set of consequences not previously identified in attachment research. Namely, couples with a unidirectional secure-base structure experience interpersonal identity conflict, whereas those with a bidirectional secure-base structure experience interpersonal identity

enhancement. These findings highlight that our attachment relationships in adulthood have an impact not only on our individual ability to engage in identity development but also on how we experience our identity development vis-à-vis each other.

The theory developed in this paper exposes two key differences between child–caregiver attachment and attachment between two adults who are partners in a dual-career couple. The first concerns the optimal secure-base structure and the second the ultimate benefit of having a secure base.

The relationship between children and their caregivers is inherently asymmetric, with the caregiver expected to provide a secure base while having no expectation of receiving it. In such a relationship, the optimal secure-base structure mirrors this inherent asymmetry—a unidirectional one in which the caregiver provides a secure base to the child. All other secure-base structures are seen as dysfunctional because they lead to an insecure attachment and require various coping mechanisms, ranging from the child avoiding the caregiver (avoidant attachment) to the child excessively clinging to the caregiver (anxious attachment), or reverse parenting, in which the child provides a secure base to the parent (Ainsworth et al., 1978). In contrast, a dual-career couple is a potentially symmetric relationship, in which both partners expect to reciprocally support and be supported by the other. Our findings suggest that in such a relationship, the optimal secure-base structure—in which both partners develop their professional identities—mirrors this symmetry and is bidirectional. We thus propose that functional adult attachment in symmetric relationships consists of being both provider and recipient of a secure base for the other. Building on these findings we suggest that the essential component in creating a secure attachment is not simply receiving a secure base but rather having alignment between the (a)symmetry inherent in the relationship and the (a)symmetry in the dyad’s secure-base structure.

Thus adult relationships that are inherently symmetrical—such as romantic partners, coworkers, or professional peers—will be most functional when both parties to the relationship provide and receive a secure-base structure, such that their secure-base structure mirrors their relationship structure. Conversely, adult relationships that are inherently asymmetric—such as boss–subordinate, mentor–mentee, or coach–coachee—will be most functional when the adult in the position of power or responsibility provides a secure base while the other party to the relations does not. This again would ensure alignment between the secure base and relationship structure.

Original formulations of attachment theory link secure base and identity development by stating that people discover and shape their identities by exploring the world (Bowlby, 1988; Rice, 1990; Shaver and Mikulincer, 1997; Feeney and Van Vleet, 2010). From this child–caregiver perspective, the ultimate benefit for a child of having a secure base is developing an individuated identity. This is an important process that enables children to confidently transition into the adult world and stop depending on their caregiver. Our research reveals that the ultimate benefit of having a secure base in a symmetric adult–adult attachment relationship is different. In bidirectional secure-base relationships partners become individuated to a degree, but also intimately connected to the other, such that their identity development is both enabled by and dependent on the other. A shared couple identity exists alongside and bolsters each partner’s individuated identity. In doing so, we speculate, they ensure healthy dependence on each other, which serves to sustain their attachment, and reap developmental benefits.

Practical Implications

Dual-career couples reflect the zeitgeist of today’s professional world (Catalyst, 1998; Parker and Arthur, 2004; Abele and Volmer, 2011; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Although the proportion of professionals in dual-career couples continues to rise, the societal narratives

concerning how to survive and thrive in them remain curiously stuck. Academics and social commentators portray sustaining dual careers as a Herculean task that requires significant trade-offs and sacrifices from both parties (Moen and Roehling, 2005; Stone, 2007; Slaughter, 2015). A key finding of our study is that this cultural narrative of struggle, trade-off, and compromise does not represent the experience of all dual-career couples. Instead, some of those we interviewed clearly interpret their careers as mutually enhancing and beneficial. As one person succinctly put it, “I think we don’t live being a dual-career couple as a challenge. It’s an adventure, so many opportunities” (31F20Y). This is important because, when making sense of their experience and constructing their identities, people draw heavily from available cultural scripts (Campbell, 1994; Gergen, 1994; McAdams, 1996; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Shifting the societal narrative, or at least adding a counter narrative, can therefore potentially help dual-career couples coauthor their experience in more positive ways.

Most research on dual-career couples focuses on practical arrangements and thus has only limited advice to offer these couples. Understanding the psychological arrangements of dual-career couples would likely help researchers offer more useful advice to these individuals. Such advice is all the more relevant in an increasingly boundaryless, self-directed, extraorganizational career landscape (Sennett, 1998; Cappelli, 1999; Ashford, George, and Blatt, 2007; Arthur, 2008; Bidwell and Briscoe, 2010) in which the influence of people’s life partners is ever more important. Our research suggests that dual-career couples should concern themselves as much with their psychological arrangements as they do with their practical ones. By working on their relationship and attempting to provide a secure base to each other, couples may be able to sustain a bidirectional secure-base structure that provides both individual and dyadic benefits. Couples need to provide strong emotional support for each other by openly discussing their current

arrangement and experimenting with ways of letting each partner own and practice the part of the relationship they might have delegated to the other, at the same time as encouraging the other to move away from the safety of the relationship to explore and experiment. This balance between closeness and distance is one that couples can find particularly hard to maintain in times of uncertainty and stress when our instinctive reaction can be to circle the wagons and hold our loved ones close.

Limitations and Future Research

As with all attempts to build theory inductively from accounts gathered from a specific population, this study is vulnerable to generalizability challenges. First, dual-career couples are an elite subset of dual-earner couples, and given their unique need to sustain two demanding work identities, it is an empirical question as to whether the findings from this study generalize to all dual-earner couples. While it stands to reason that dual-earner and in fact all couples will have a unidirectional or bidirectional secure-base structure, the impact of this on the couple may vary. In dual-career couples, for whom work is a central source of self-definition, it is perhaps not surprising that the exploratory behavior enabled by having a secure-base partner is conducted in the domain of work. For other couples in which different life domains are central, exploratory behavior may be more evident in domains aside from work. The relatively large and diverse nature of our sample does give us confidence that our findings will have naturalistic generalizability to other dual-career couples, enabling people to identify “the similarities of objects and issues” (Stake, 1978: 6) between couples in our sample and those in other contexts.

Most research studies raise at least as many questions as they answer. The novelty of our theory building, which brings together three literatures that have as yet remained largely separate, raises an unusual number of questions but also opens exciting avenues for future

research. There are immense opportunities to deepen and broaden existing organizational theories by applying attachment theory to the domain of work. Although some social scientists have applied attachment theory to work by looking at the connection between workers' general attachment patterns and workplace outcomes such as stress (Schirmer and Lopez, 2001) and burnout (Pines, 2004), there has not yet been research on its relevance to work relationships. Many organizational phenomena—from trust and relationship repair (e.g. Pratt and Dirks, 2007; Petriglieri, 2015) to mentoring and peer support (e.g. Kram, 1988; Gersick, Dutton, and Bartunek, 2000) to leadership (e.g. Hogg, 2001; DeRue and Ashford, 2010)—are relational. Using attachment theory to investigate what lies beneath the surface of these relationships, as we have done, has the potential both to explain these phenomena in new ways and to identify new dyadic-level effects. As an example, researchers have made significant progress investigating when and how people give care to and receive it from each other in organizations as well as what the effects are of such interactions (Kahn, 1993; Rynes et al., 2012; Barsade and O'Neill, 2014). This organizational caregiving represents the safe-haven function of attachment relationships (Kahn, 1996; Louis, 1996). As yet unexplored are when and to what effect people in organizations provide a secure base for each other, thus encouraging each other's exploratory behavior and identity development. With the expectation in modern organizations that individuals will chart their own career path and create their own opportunities to grow (Sonenshein et al., 2013), understanding the power of relationships in this area is important. We hypothesize that this could occur in peer–peer, mentor–mentee, boss–subordinate, and leader–follower relationships, all of which are worthy of future research in terms of secure-base dynamics.

Our findings suggest that couples serve as micro identity workspaces for their members. The concept of identity workspaces, defined as “institutions that provide a holding environment for individuals’ identity work” (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010: 44), has thus far been theorized and researched at the institutional and organizational level. Our study suggests that relationships can also act as identity workspaces. The presence of monogamy to satisfy erotic and relational needs in modern society (Phillips, 2010) makes spouses the most salient relationship partners that many adults have in a period of their lives when their careers are also central. The importance of that relationship has been reinforced by the increasingly short-term, instrumental nature of the relationship between workers and their employing organizations (Rousseau, 1990; Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). It would be interesting for future research to explore whether marriage as an institution compensates for the lack of organizational identification and makes people more willing to take the risks required to thrive in contemporary careers. Equally interesting would be to research the different forms that micro identity workspaces take and how these are shaped by the attachment structure of the couple.

Cutting-edge theorizing on multiple identities at the individual level has called on researchers to investigate intra-individual identity configurations (Ramarajan, 2015). Our study indicates that it would be equally useful to investigate interpersonal identity configurations as a way to parse out dyadic mechanisms by which people construct their identities. This effort would broaden existing scholarship that shows how our relational partners act as triggers (Pratt, 2000), shapers (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009), and validators (Van Maanen, 2010) of our identities. It would also require scholars to adopt a truly relational approach by investigating both parties in a relationship rather than focusing on one key actor.

Professionals often publicly attribute their success to their spouses, and current popular

wisdom holds that the most important career choice a person makes is whom to marry (Sandberg, 2013). These sentiments, like much career literature, are focused on how people attain and sustain progressively more-senior roles. Our study shows that it is not only for economic or objective career progression that our spouses matter but, perhaps more importantly, for their role in shaping how we inhabit our professional roles and wider lives. Although our spouses may or may not affect what we do in our professional lives, they have a profound impact on how we interpret those lives and who we become through them.

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Table 1. Sample Description

| | Couples / Individuals |
|--|---|
| Number of couples | 50 |
| Average age (range) | 46 (27–61) |
| Average relationship length (range) | 16 (2–30) |
| Couples with no children | 8 |
| Couples with 1–4 children | 42 |
| Individuals in corporate careers | 71 |
| Individuals in entrepreneurial careers | 12 |
| Individuals in professional careers* | 4 |
| Individuals in other careers† | 13 |
| Most-junior representative jobs | Local VP multinational business Manager strategy consultancy Mid-level civil servant Junior lawyer/Doctor Founder small startup |
| Most-senior representative jobs | CEO multinational business Head partner strategy consultancy Senior politician/ambassador Senior lawyer/doctor Founder/CEO large business Portfolio career board memberships |

* Professional careers included those in medicine and law.

† Other careers included those in the not-for-profit, academic, political, and diplomatic domains.

Table 2. Illustrative Evidence for Interpersonal Secure-base Structures

Unidirectional Secure-base Structure

Nishesh (16M4Y) perceived Neena (16F4Y) to be a secure base for him, but Neena did not see Nishesh as a secure base for her. Nishesh, who works in professional services, described Neena as being particularly encouraging of him when he decided to explore the possibility of becoming a partner in a different firm. “Neena was extremely supportive of it and has been instrumental coaching-wise . . . it was a common project and she was very supportive of it.” He went on to describe how after joining his new firm, he relied on the space Neena provided him to process the difficulties he encountered: “I use her [as] a sounding board all the time. I arrived as a very young partner from an outside firm so the first 18 months have been extremely difficult in terms of internal recognition. And so she’s been extremely helpful.”

When asked about Nishesh’s role in helping her exploration or supporting her struggles at work, Neena replied, “He’s not very good at that. I mean even yesterday I had an opportunity to build a new job, he basically told me he had work to do and couldn’t discuss it. . . . And I’ll always remember in 2010 I was completely stuck with my job, and I felt completely at a loss and he was completely clueless.”

Nishesh recognized the asymmetry of psychological support in their relationship and attributed it to the demanding nature of his professional identity, commenting, “I’m slightly double-faced in terms of the type of relationship I have with my wife because I absolutely love it, but at the same time [my work] takes a toll on me, the hands are on the wheel and it’s extremely taxing. . . . I would like to find a way to be more supportive of her.”

Bidirectional Secure-base Structure

Delia (12F13Y) and Dirk (12M13Y) both saw each other as a secure base, and Delia explained how this role was passed between them as and when the other needed it: “I think we both tend to lean on each other where we need to. I certainly feel like I can trust Dirk to be there and to support me when I need it—and the opposite [too].”

Both had worked in the same global technology company since meeting and had experienced times in which the other had encouraged them to explore options that would move them to their desired professional path, and both had faced setbacks in their exploration in response to which the other had provided a dependable safe environment to which they could retreat. Dirk recalled Delia’s response to him being turned down for a promotion that would have enabled him “to become a team leader. . . . I was feeling really frustrated so I called Delia and she was like ‘What the hell?’ She was like angry. And that night she took me out for beers and was telling me ‘this is their problem, not your problem.’ It’s that support we have for each other on a regular basis that made me get up and carry on.”

Delia gave an example of applying for a role “in the educational sector which is everything I’m really excited about doing.” The role was a big jump in terms of promotion for Delia, and although she “hesitated in applying, Dirk really encouraged me, he even was coaching me giving me feedback for the interview.” This was despite the job necessitating him to make a geographical move.

Table 3. Illustrative Evidence for Interpersonal Professional Identity Relationships

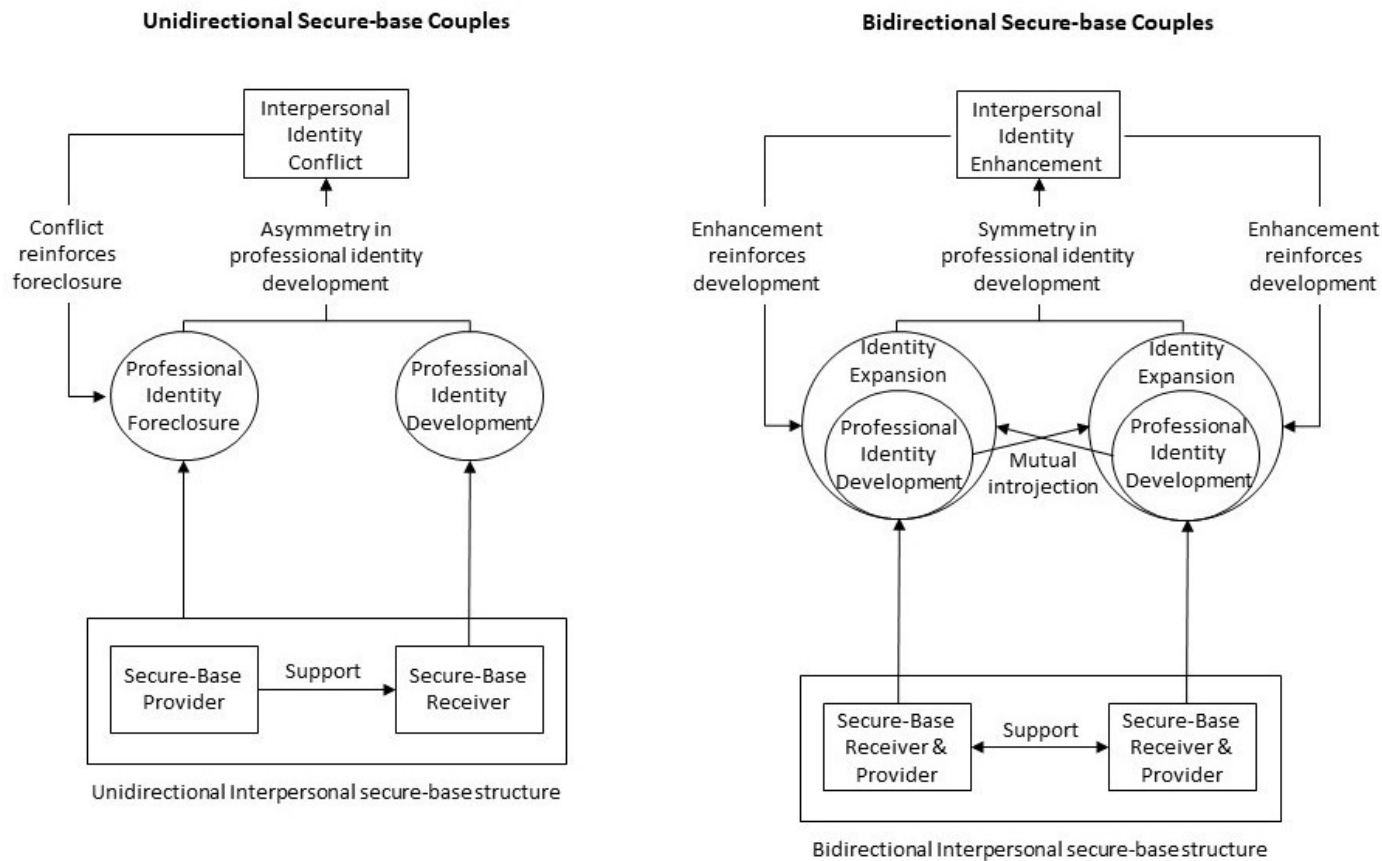
| Professional Identity Conflict |
|--|
| <p>In common with other unidirectional secure-base couples, Paula (39F6Y), who experienced Parwez (39M6Y) as a secure base for her, had progressively developed her professional identity, but Parwez, who did not experience Paula as a secure base for him, had foreclosed his professional identity. Paula was on the “fast track program to become a business unit leader in [global Fast moving consumer goods company],” and over the six years of their relationship she said she had “really developed, both in taking on new roles that have stretched me, but also in my sense of who I am as a leader, I’ve grown a lot.” Parwez, on the other hand, felt “stuck. I’m stuck in my role. I’ve been in it for four years which is longer than I should have been. But I’m also stuck because I cannot jump. I see some options, for example I’d like to become an AI specialist, but right now that’s not possible.” When probed why not, Parwez replied, “We can’t both push ahead at the same time. Paula’s career takes a lot of energy and right now we’re focused on supporting that.”</p> <p>Both Paula and Parwez experienced their professional identities to be in a conflictual relationship. Paula explained, “The way we see it is that right now it’s my turn. I mean it’s just not possible for both of us to develop fast at the same time. There always needs to be one supporting.” It had, however, been Paula’s turn for six years and when asked about the future, they seemed locked into the roles they had established early in their relationship. As Parwez explained, “We know that Paula has a big jump, a big promotion on the horizon to become [name of role]. She’ll need a few years to settle into that. It’s frustrating because I know that I am standing still, going backwards. She has great opportunities and I want to support her, but I am frustrated that it means I’ll be stuck even longer.”</p> |
| Professional Identity Enhancement |
| <p>Like all members of bidirectional secure-base couples, both George (26M13Y) and Gwenn (26F13Y) reported that they had progressively developed their professional identities. Gwenn’s professional identity development encompassed a major transition when she left management consultancy and “became an entrepreneur,” setting up a retail business, which was “something I always dreamed of doing.” George had explored and developed his professional identity within a set career track in the banking sector where, he said, “I gradually worked my way to become a fairly senior executive, and I’m ambitious. I’m on a very short list of people to become [the CEO] of the bank.” Both George and Gwenn acknowledged the other’s encouragement of their exploration was instrumental to their professional identity development. George explained:</p> <p>“We both want to accomplish things professionally [and] she’s supported me throughout, for example this year has been especially difficult for me. I was in the process of selling the company I was running, I had to have an investment banking lifestyle for a couple of months [referring to the volume of work]. After that we had a fairly explicit discussion around, when I sold this other bank, should I go for the next position, or should I take an easier position. Gwenn said ‘I think you should take it.’”</p> <p>For her part Gwenn said, “I would never have become an entrepreneur if it had not been for his support.”</p> |

Both Gwenn and George interpreted their professional identities to be in an enhancing relationship. Gwenn explained, “We are better because of the other. I think we’ve both become better persons and also more successful in our careers because of the other person.”

Like other bidirectional couples, George and Gwenn internalized attributes of each other’s professional identity into their own. George, for example, explained the connection between Gwenn becoming an entrepreneur and his own professional identity. Although he did not feel he could ever actually become an entrepreneur like her, he did find himself enacting his professional identity in an entrepreneurial way:

“I’m not meant for a startup. But much more actually, to some extent, be the entrepreneur in a bigger corporation. So in that, you know, if I take a bank, which is very conservative, then I’m the rebel in the bank, and I’m the entrepreneur in the bank.”

Figure 1. Process model of secure-base interpersonal professional identity dynamics.



ONLINE APPENDIX: Interview Protocol

All interviews were semi-structured. This protocol shows the main categories of questions and the subquestions used as probes when the informants' general narrative did not address these points.

1. Tell me about how you and [partner's name] met and got together.
 - a. Was [partner name] your first long-term relationship or have there been others?
 - b. Where were you in your careers at the time?
 - c. Were you aware from the beginning what each other's career aspirations were?
2. Tell me about the development of your couple over time.
 - a. Are you married? Do you have children? If so, when were they born?
 - b. Have you faced any significant life decisions so far while you have been together with [partner's name]? How did you navigate these personally/as a couple?
 - c. What have been some of the key highs and lows of your time with [partner's name]?
 - d. Do you feel that you have gone through different stages or phases as a couple? If so, can you describe them and put names to them? What were the events that triggered a new stage? Did you go through these stages at the same time or were they staggered?
 - e. How do you make decisions together?
3. Has [partner's name] influenced who you are as a person?
 - a. If I asked you to draw two circles, one representing yourself and who you are and the other representing [partner name] and who he/she is, how much would they overlap?
 - b. How would you describe your couple as a unit?
 - c. Would you say you are similar to [partner's name] or different? In what ways?
 - d. What would you say are the strengths of your couple (the things you have figured out)? What are the biggest challenges for your couple (the things you struggle with)?
4. Tell me about your career path to date.
 - a. Have there been any significant turning points in your career to date? Has [partner's name] had any influence on those?
 - b. Have there been times when you have struggled with your career? What did you do? Did [partner's name] have any input at those times?
 - c. How do you feel about your career?
 - d. How do you define success in your career?
 - e. Has [partner's name] had any influence on how you feel about your career?
 - f. How would you describe yourself as a professional?
 - g. Do you feel that your sense of who you are as a professional is influenced in any way by [partner's name]?
5. Tell me about [partner's name]'s career.
 - a. How do you feel about [partner's name]'s career?
 - b. How do you think [partner's name] feels about your career?
 - c. Are there things in [partner's name]'s career that you would like to have in yours?
 - d. Do you ever feel competitive toward [partner's name]? If so, how and about what?

6. How do you see your career path vis-à-vis [partner's name]'s career path?
 - a. If I asked you to draw two circles, one representing your career and the other [partner's name]'s career, to what extent would they overlap?
 - b. Have you ever felt that you had to limit your own career to further [partner's name]'s? How?
 - c. Have you ever felt that [partner's name] had to limit his/her career to further yours? How?
 - d. Is there anything about being in your couple that helps your career?
 - e. Is there anything about being in your couple that harms your career?
7. Can you give me some examples of situations in which things have worked particularly well between you and [partner's name] and both of your careers?
 - a. Can you give me some examples of situations in which things have not worked so well between you and [partner's name] and both of your careers?
8. How do you see your career developing in the future?
 - a. How do you see [partner's name]'s career developing in the future?
 - b. How do you see your couple developing in the future?
9. What was your experience of dual-career couples when you were a child/adolescent?
 - a. What did your parents do?
 - b. What was their relationship to each other/their careers/to you as a child like?
 - c. [If they have children who are old enough] How do your children feel about your careers?
 - d. What do you think your children will learn from you and [partner's name] about how to manage relationships and careers?
10. Is there anything that we didn't talk about that you think it would be important for me to understand about your life and career and relationship with [partner name]?